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A Single Thread: Stunning prose that will stay with you for a long time

Book review: Tracy Chevalier's novel on the consequences of war may be her best yet



American-British novelist Tracy Chevalier. Photograph: Roberto Ricciuti/Getty

In the aftermath of the first World War, as Great Britain mourned a generation of lost men, the media coined a term for the women who would have married them – “surplus.” The 1921 Census of England and Wales reported an estimated 1.72 million more women than men and it became clear that the fortunes and fates of these “surplus women” would impact society in dramatic ways. This new demographic of single women would have to become financially independent and establish new methods for acquiring status in society beyond that of wife and mother.

Tracy Chevalier's 10th novel, *A Single Thread*, is narrated by Violet Speedwell, a fictional surplus woman of the time whose perspective allows us to understand the practical realities of her plight. Through a thoughtful and arresting account of her struggle to curate a new post-war identity for herself, we understand that Violet is one of thousands of women on the brink of starvation physically, emotionally and culturally. As Violet says, “If she was to make a mark on the world, she would have to do so in another way.”

Chevalier has built her career on an ability to delicately expose the ordinary human experience as a feat of extraordinary courage and beauty. It is now 20 years and 1.6 million book sales since Chevalier published *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, the book that set her career alight, but her commitment to salvaging lives from the footnotes of history and placing them at the centre of her storytelling remains unwavering. This novel illuminates the consequences

of war through a voice that history has so often silenced, a single woman falling through the cracks of a society that struggles to perceive her value.

Independent Life

In an attempt to escape the likely fate of the “spinster” daughter as her mother’s nurse, Violet moves to Winchester to work as a typist in an attempt to uncover an independent life of her own. Chevalier interrogates the expectations society had for a single woman of the time, where their duty lay and the reluctance to grant them agency in the pursuit of a quiet happiness of their own. And yet, Violet is not embittered by the challenges she faces. Against great and gentle adversaries, she remains determined and hopeful that she might find a way through her grief, her penury and familial oppression to embrace a second act.

Violet’s acceptance into the fold of the Winchester Cathedral Broders Group is the first crucial step. As she embraces embroidery as a way of contributing a lasting legacy of her existence we encounter the real-life renowned embroiderer, Louisa Pesel. Chevalier’s rich accounts of the craft, alongside a deeply engaging view into the world of bell-ringing, offer insights into the skill and creativity required to master these crafts that serves to elevate their often under-appreciated talents into that of fine art. There is also a delicious scrutiny of the politics, micro-aggressions and high drama that unfold in community groups in ways that feel truly universal. It is within the broderer’s society that Violet finds the support and friendship that she needs to feel empowered enough to pursue her own path. Through their work, the fabric of their lives is sewn together and we see the power of a single thread.

Chevalier also offers a poignant view on the evergreen dangers of sexual assault for a vulnerable woman and it is concerning the extent that almost 90 years later her experiences of predatory behaviour remain entirely relatable. Beyond this more sinister element, the novel is truly excellent in spotlighting the wider sexual politics of the time and in particular presents a very thoughtful and moving account of the experience of a lesbian couple who are trying to introduce their relationship to society. As has been said so many times before, the personal is the political and through Chevalier’s story of one woman’s personal experience, we are deposited right into the heart of the political landscape at the time. The second World War is dawning and it is painful to witness a society so barely recovered from one war, standing at the cusp of another.

A Single Thread is not a fast-paced, plot-driven tour de force but therein lies its charm; the novel is a subtle, delicate portrayal of a life of quiet power. The prose is stunning without any showboating; the historical detail beautifully interwoven with a light touch, and the cumulative effect is more powerful than immediately evident. This novel will stay with you for a long time, and may be Chevalier’s best yet.

